

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In this thesis I will discuss a famous American novelist for his satirical and critical works which show sympathetic views of the middle-class American life in the 1920s. He is Harry Sinclair Lewis. Lewis is the first American who wins the Nobel Prize of the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1930. He also gets the Pulitzer Prize nomination for Babbitt and Main Street. Moreover, according to Lewis Sinclair & His Life: Biography, Lewis's issue involving the powerless in the society makes his work still vital and pertinent today as his analysis of the America of the 1920s holds true for the America of today (Parry, n.d).

I would like to discuss the novel Babbitt (1922) by Harry Sinclair Lewis for the reason that Babbitt contains moderate views of the middle class American life in the 1920s. According to A History of the United States on 1900 Volume I, 1900-1920,

the decade of 1920s in America is known as the Golden Twenties or the Roaring Twentieth. In this decade, America becomes the wealthiest country in the world with no obvious rival on account of its vast economic power. As a sequence, the 1920s shows a brand new life of America after World War I. Technology and car industry were booming. Afterwards, business is regarded as the main commerce in America. All citizens seemed to have a reasonably well paid job and they seemed to have a lot of spare cash to spend, and it looked like to be the case that if you wanted something then you got it (S. Link, 1973: 7-8). Therefore, I am of the opinion that the prosperity of America brought great changes in people's life as people were fascinated by the chances and affluence. They were sucked out by business ideals, and general consistency. Furthermore, the country's system performed as an authority; so that, the inhabitants were under controlled ultimately. People were expected to be concerned with every aspect of life to conform to the society demands.

Consequently, I am of the opinion that Babbitt is about a novel which describes a new stereotype of the American seeing that the Americans are the total conformists who are carried along by the tide of business. In addition, it also shows the developments in the national character that followed World War I, a war which turned the traditional values inside out as well as intensified Americans' awareness of how the rest of the world perceived them. Moreover, based on Britannica Nobel Prizes guide to the noble prizes, the name of Babbitt passes into general usage to represent the optimistic, self-congratulatory, middle-aged businessman whose horizons were bounded by his village limits (Britannica, 1997).

Zenith, a composite city where the protagonist, George F. Babbitt lives, reflects those Midwestern cities that are growing rapidly in the 1900s. It has almost completely replaced the small town, and its economic power has shifted from farming to machine technology; as a result, Zenith is defined in terms of industrial city, because of many skyscrapers are built for business centers. For that reason Zenith has become the best and fast-growing partner among other cities on account of its condensed production. The rapid growth of Zenith supports the life of an advanced city, especially in the aspect of economic state.

Subsequently, the standard life in Zenith grows up and the inhabitants pay more attention to their daily life in effort to fit themselves to the high standard of living. Zenith takes control to change the whole market and none is powerful and enduring to oppose the system. Therefore, people behave and follow the lifestyle like the society does. Considering that Zenith has standardized the life, such as having a sense of delight in the luxurious things; doing business is all important, wearing their standard costume as a businessman, and joining deceitful social activities, always spending time for the dining-committee and Country Clubs; living in the same decorated restricted houses for the haves (Lewis, 1996).

And through the protagonist, George F. Babbitt, a middle-class successful businessman who follows the customs of the society, the author tries to present an insight from Babbitt's experience. By taking Babbitt's experience into account, people begin to rebel against the middle-class community of which he is a part; Babbitt seeks to expose the hypocrisy and emptiness underlying the middle-class life.

I would like to discuss the theme of Sinclair Lewis' Babbitt as the theme is one of the most important elements in the novel. According to Harry Shaw in Dictionary of Literary Terms, "Theme is the central idea and dominating idea in a literary work and the message or moral implicit in any work of art" (Shaw, 1972 : 378). I try to reveal the theme through the portrayal of the protagonist because the protagonist, Babbitt, is being described in detail by the author and he is an unforgettable character mentioned by the author in the novel. As a result, Babbitt gives a lot of contribution in revealing the theme of the novel. That is the reason why I choose this character, George F. Babbitt, to discuss and then I try to relate it to the theme which contains a message or implicit moral in the novel, Babbitt.

## **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The problems of this study are:

1. What is the theme of the novel?
2. How does the portrayal of the protagonist help to reveal the theme?

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

Based on the statement of the problem, the purposes of the study are:

1. To show the theme of the novel.
2. To show how the portrayal of the protagonist helps to reveal the theme.

## **METHOD OF RESEARCH**

In analyzing my thesis, I used the formalist approach which requires a thorough analysis of the novel in order to find the theme through the portrayal of the protagonist who helps much in analyzing my thesis.

In addition, I apply the library research. First, I read Babbitt as the primary text, and then I read several reference books that are relevant to support this analysis. Next, I also explore some internet sites to get more related information for my thesis. Finally, I analyze the theme of the novel which is revealed through the portrayal of the protagonist and finally I draw a conclusion.

## **THE ORGANIZATION OF THE THESIS**

The thesis will be divided into three chapters, preceded by the Preface and Abstract. In Chapter One, I present the Introduction, which consists of Background of the study, Statement of the Problem, Purpose of the Study, Method of Research, and Organization of the Thesis, followed by Chapter Two, in which I present the discussion of the theme through the portrayal of the protagonist. Next, Chapter Three is the conclusion of what has been discussed in the previous chapter. The thesis ends with the Bibliography, which consists of a list of reference books and the sources which are used in the analysis. There are also the Appendices, which consist of the Biography of Sinclair Lewis and Synopsis of the novel, Babbitt.